

The Reverend Thomas C. Willadsen, First Presbyterian Church, Oshkosh, Wisconsin, February 15, 2015, Evolution Sunday, I Kings 19:10b-13a, Romans 1:20 “What We Don’t See and Hear (Yet)”

Last year I was invited to a program at the Adler Planetarium in Chicago called Clergy Contributions to Science. An astronomer who does research at the planetarium who also teaches at the University of Chicago put the program together. I was invited because our congregation was one of the first ones to participate in The Clergy Letter Project, which was organized by Michael Zimmerman who used to teach at UW-O. Almost 10 years ago Michael contacted me about his idea to organize churches to speak out against the ideology that puts science in opposition to faith. You’ve heard about efforts to ban the instruction of evolution in public schools, or more subtle efforts to teach something called “Intelligent Design” as a parallel--and equally valid explanation--for the rise of life on earth. As a local church leader, apparently one with a reputation for respecting, even admiring scientific progress, I was asked to sign on to the first Evolution Sunday in 2006.

I had three responses to Dr. Zimmerman’s idea:

First, I agreed that faith is in no way threatened by science, and would be happy to sign on and commit to observing Evolution Sunday in February. That month was picked because Charles Darwin’s birthday is February 12.

Second, I believed that what he is doing, trying to organize faith communities, as an employee of the State of Wisconsin was screamingly unconstitutional. For someone on the state’s payroll to even suggest I address a specific topic in worship or programming here, crossed the line that I draw between church and state.

Third, I told him that organizing faith communities is like herding cats. I wished him well, but my experience in Oshkosh is that it is very, very hard to bring different Christian churches together in common projects, never mind reaching non-Christian faith traditions. This year more than 13,000 faith leaders have signed the letter.

Thus began a frank, congenial friendship. I have preaching on new discoveries in astronomy almost yearly for more than 20 years now. Many of you pass clippings on to me, and web links about what astronomers and physicists are discovering.

Last February, at the Clergy Contributions to Science program the featured speaker was Brother Guy Consolmagno, a Jesuit employed by the Vatican as an astronomer. Did you know that the Vatican has its own astronomers? I didn't. Looks like they finally dropped their grudge against Galileo. There in the foyer of the planetarium, I spotted Brother Guy, he was dressed in a clerical robe. I walked over and said, "Buon journo!" He said "Buon journo!" back. Then I said, "I just exhausted my Italian." He said, "That's OK, I can speak English. I grew up in Florida." Later in the day he talked about the research he'd been doing, tracking a meteor in the Asteroid Belt. He showed video of the meteorite that had recently exploded over Russia.

A few months later, in July of last year, Brother Guy's name was in the news because he received The Carl Sagan Medal from the American Astronomical Society for "outstanding communication by an active planetary scientist to the general public." Brother Guy "occupies a unique position within our profession" the Society said, "as a credible spokesperson for scientific

honesty within the context of religious belief.” <http://jesuits.org/news-detail?TN=NEWS-20140714111304>, accessed 1/27/15

I am baffled when I hear about Christians who hold the marvels of science in disdain. I just don't get it when churches tell their members that parents should not vaccinate their children because God will protect them. To me both science and faith start with a sense of wonder. And the great thing about that word “wonder” is that it means both “awe” and “curiosity.” The deep desire, even the drive, to understand something, that kind of curiosity, that thirst for understanding is a religious feeling to me. Wonder and mystery, the feeling of being overwhelmed by, and in the presence of, a great power beyond our ability to understand or control is the foundation of faith. For some people it's looking at the stars on a clear night. Today we know that the light we see has travelled billions and billions of miles over eons to reach our eyes. But the depth of wonder we feel today is probably the same as the people felt in Biblical times, or even before them. And the depth of the mystery just doesn't go away.

Wednesday the New York Times ran Val Fitch's obituary. Dr. Fitch won the Nobel Prize for physics in 1980. I'd never heard of him, but the statement he wrote when he received the prize more than 30 years ago speaks to the wonder and mystery of creation, “...each time a new frontier of observation is broached we inevitably discover new phenomena which force us to modify substantially our previous conceptions. I believe this process to be unending, that the delights and challenges of unexpected discovery will continue always.” NYT 2/11/15, p. A24

I went to the Adler Planetarium last Tuesday. They held another Clergy Day. And this time I noticed something about the discoveries in astronomy that have taken place in my lifetime: We keep finding smaller and smaller things. For example, 40 years ago I did a science fair project on the planet Jupiter. Classmates did projects on the solar system, but I decided to really focus on the largest planet. I was the only one in the school who knew that Jupiter had 13 moons. National Geographic had just revealed that discovery the month before. I thought I was pretty hot stuff telling Paul Matthews that he was wrong, that my science was more current than his. Tuesday I learned that astronomers now have counted 66 moons around Jupiter. We keep building bigger and bigger machines that find smaller and smaller objects.

The sequence scientists go through goes from wonder to observation to discovery. And the discoveries lead to more and more questions, because the universe is a lot more complicated, wonderful and wonder-filled the closer we look.

Just one more example, or we could be here all morning. Last year astronomers for NASA found that there are organic molecules in the interstellar medium. Organic molecules are necessary for life to exist—as far as we know. The interstellar medium is “outer space,” and we used to believe that it was a vacuum, that there was literally nothing out there between stars. As stronger telescopes and spectrographs have been built and pointed into space, we are finding things that used to be too small to see. When we couldn’t see them, we assumed there was nothing there.

In 1936 Albert Einstein theorized that it might be possible for very, very massive objects with very strong gravity to distort space and bend light. Light that passed by such objects would not travel in straight lines. It's hard to imagine, but it appears to be true. Space and light can be bent. We can't "see" the Black Holes that bend space and light, but we can see the effects of Black Holes and we can imagine and theorize what they are like.

At the planetarium I learned that today cosmologists believe that we can see and interact with only about 4% of the Universe. Given the way things move through space and what we know and believe about how gravity works, there is a lot of mass and energy that humans simply have not built machines to detect...yet. And so we build particle colliders to force sub atomic particles to crash into each other at very high speeds to see what happens. And each time we make a new discovery we have to adjust to this knowledge, and each new discovery reveals different mysteries and raises different questions. And we look at tinier and tinier things to understand the biggest questions.

Looking for things too small to see, listening for sounds that cannot be heard, reminded me of the story of Elijah, today's Old Testament lesson. Elijah had been a faithful prophet, he had been true to God and defeated the prophets of Baal in a contest. This made Jezebel, wife of King Ahab, and backer of the prophets of Baal, really, really angry. She sent men after Elijah to kill him. Elijah ran away and hid in a cave. He was totally ready to get out of the prophet business once and for all. He was scared, he was tired and he was alone. That's when God spoke to him. But God didn't speak in the wind that was mighty enough to break rocks. And God didn't speak in an earthquake that followed the wind, and God did not speak in the fire that followed the

earthquake. No, God spoke to Elijah in “a voice of sheer silence.” Maybe you learned this verse as “a still, small voice.” God reached Elijah, and encouraged him in a voice of sheer silence, a voice that Elijah couldn’t hear. And it was that voice that brought him out of hiding. A voice that was too soft for the ear to detect, but it was *real*. Christian mystic Meister Eckhart said, “There is nothing so much like God in all the universe as silence.”

The first Christians understood that God could not be seen, but God’s existence was real because it was manifest in Creation. “Ever since the creation of the world [God’s] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things [God] has made.” Romans 1:20

And as we look at smaller and smaller things we are filled with more and more wonder and awe. And questions spurred by our discoveries. As Thomas Carlyle wrote, “[T]hrough every star, through every blade of grass, is not God made visible if we will open our minds and our eyes?” The anthem the choir just sang has a line that really captures this idea: “Lord, how thy wonders are displayed, where’er I turn my eyes, if I survey the ground I tread or gaze upon the skies.”

The Romans did not see the Immortal, Invisible God, neither can we. Elijah didn’t hear the sheer silence through which God addressed him.

Like massive objects that we cannot see with our eyes, which are large enough to bend space and light, God is real, and shaping our lives. And God has given us the gift of curiosity and the sense of wonder to keep searching for things we cannot yet see and listening to sounds we cannot yet

hear. And each discovery shows us a Creator who is more powerful, mysterious and wonderful than we can yet imagine. Amen.